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SUBJECT: UMMA PARTY OFFICIAL DENIES AGREEMENT WITH NCP

REF: KHARTOUM 332

Dialogue, But No Agreement, With NCP

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¶1. (SBU) On March 6 Emboffs met with Dr. Mariam Al Sadig Al Mahdi, Secretary for Foreign Relations, National Umma Party (and daughter

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of Umma leader and former Prime Minister Al-Sadiq Al-Mahdi). Emboff's asked Dr. Al Mahdi about press reports suggesting that Umma and the National Congress Party (NCP) have entered into a wide ranging "agreement." Al Mahdi denied that there is any formal agreement between her party and the NCP. Rather, she said, the two sides have agreed to open a dialogue and establish a framework within which to proceed. On March 5, the two parties agreed to meet on a monthly basis. Al Mahdi indicated that Umma has been engaged in similar discussions with other parties for some time.

An End to the "NCP State?"

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¶2. (SBU) Mahdi said that Umma has induced the NCP to agree to the hiring of members of other political parties for positions in the government (at the working level in the Ministries and various government services, not senior political appointments). Until now, she said, government employment either has required NCP membership, or recommendation of an NCP-official. Al Mahdi remarked that this had reduced Sudan to being an "NCP state." This was not a power-sharing agreement, she emphasized, but applied to working level positions. She said that Umma will be back in the government at the top anyway, if 2009 elections are free and fair,

Engaging with All Parties

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¶3. (SBU) According to Dr. Al Mahdi, these discussions were initiated by the NCP. Following the crisis within the Government of National Unity (GNU) caused by the SPLM's withdrawal from the Council of Ministers in December, the NCP has been advocating a policy of "inclusiveness." It now is reaching out to the other opposition parties outside of the GNU. Its approach to the Umma Party is part of that broader strategy.

¶4. (SBU) Al Mahdi explained that this is the third attempt at a formal dialogue with the NCP undertaken by the Umma Party since ¶2000. During that same period, Umma has been engaged in discussions with the other political parties and, including with the NCP, currently is involved in five separate party dialogues. In these discussions, she said, Umma is pursuing broad agreement on five issues: agreeing on basic freedoms, resolution of the Darfur conflict, reaching a common vision for the CPA (with parties other than the NCP and SPLM), consensus on the election law, and building inter-party trust and confidence.

Comment

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15. (SBU) Dr. Al-Mahdi downplayed the importance of this framework agreement with the NCP, trying to put it in a broader context of other existing discussions in which Umma is participating. She also stated that contacts were begun at the NCP Party's initiative, not the Umma Party's initiative. She portrayed the NCP as badly shaken by the SPLM's walk-out from the GNU in November and seeking to deepen its ties with other parties outside the GNU. It is not apparent that Umma's other dialogues have borne much fruit thus far.

Whether the new discussions lead to anything significant - and more importantly whether the Umma party is able to regain a share of the political stage in Sudan - remains to be seen. Many observers see the party as a spent force with its traditional constituencies already being poached by the NCP, SPLM and Darfur rebel groups.

FERNANDEZ